# Curriculum Reform in South Africa: Outcomes-Based Education in a BRICS Country

Michèle Jennifer Schmidt

Received in November 2024

**Michèle Jennifer Schmidt** — PhD in Policy Studies & Educational Administration, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University. Address: 8888 University Dr., Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6. E-mail: mschmidt@sfu.ca. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7596-4766

Abstract

South Africa, a member of the BRICS group of countries, is uniquely positioned within the global education expansion project. This paper aims to remind the reader of the foundational problems in education reform in an emerging economy space, such as in BRICS, and the structural limitations to implementing policy due to constraints such as policy symbolism, policy borrowing, and the challenges facing developing countries and in the case of this paper, in South Africa. The paper presents a thoughtful and comprehensive analysis of the challenges and implications associated with the nature of an educational cooperation counter-dependency structure aimed at expanding educational reform in a BRICS country. It offers an alternative policy approach-*policy learning*-to address policy reform. The paper is highly relevant to contemporary academic discussions on educational policy borrowing, curriculum reform and the socio-political dynamics of education in developing countries.

Keywords

policy borrowing, BRICS, education cooperation, education reform, outcomes-based education, policy learning

For citing

Schmidt M.J. (2025) Curriculum Reform in South Africa: Outcomes-Based Education in a BRICS Country. *Voprosy obrazovaniya / Educational Studies Moscow*, no 4, pp. 293–309. https://doi.org/10.17323/vo-2025-24022

## Introduction. Context of BRICS and education cooperation

South Africa, a member of the BRICS group of countries, is uniquely positioned within the global education expansion project. It faces distinct challenges in promoting education diversity via reform policies in the context of the Global South, which differ from those of the other BRICS countries. In the space of continuous education reform, there is an urgent need for context-specific policy solutions and immediate action. I examine one particular reform — Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), which, despite being an older and well-studied initiative, remains at the heart of several essential policy reiterations in South Africa. This paper aims to remind the reader of the foundational problems of education reform in an emerging economy and the structural limitations to implementing this policy, due to constraints such as policy symbolism and policy borrowing, as well as the challenges fa-

cing developing countries — in the case of this study, South Africa. The very nature of the BRICS group is to bring together countries facing significant economic and educational challenges.

The countries that comprise BRICS, which historically stands for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, (and now there are six new members – Indonesia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Ethiopia, plus Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam as 'partner countries'), are an informal grouping of emerging economies hoping to increase their global power alongside Western countries. BRICS was established in 2009 to address the domination by Western powers that are no longer serving the interests of developing countries and to form an alternative coalition in the eyes of major international groups (e.g., the World Bank, the Group of Seven, and the UN Security Council) [Singh, 2023]. This resulted in a range of geopolitical implications and challenges.

While economic projects tend to be prioritized within BRICS, since 2015, a BRICS development and education cooperation agenda has proven to be equally important [Rodrigues, 2018]. The Fortaleza Declaration stresses the "strategic importance of education for sustainable development and inclusive economic growth" [Ibid. P. 86]. The BRICS countries increasingly view education as an investment in human resources, economic growth, and social development. Each BRICS country has constitutionally recognized access to education as a fundamental right [UNESCO, 2014]. However, achieving this goal is not easy due to significant differences in investment levels and educational quality across countries.

Comparing education systems in BRICS countries remains a profoundly complex endeavour as it involves considering different educational challenges, priorities, agendas, and stages of development. In short, the mainstream literature on international and comparative educational research often limits itself to case studies of individual BRICS member countries [Ardichvili, Zavyalova, Minina, 2012; Carnoy et al., 2014]. It is, therefore, not within the scope of this paper to make a comparison between the South African education reform and those in the other BRICS countries; however, it is still possible and helpful to explore common agendas, projects, relations and potential synergies generated within BRICS and implications of South Africa's experience with OBE for other countries.

This paper focuses on the main critique of educational policy borrowing in BRICS countries, which is described as a historical approach of adopting 'best/good/effective practices' from Western countries through policy transfer with a view to enhancing education. Instead, recent scholars are proposing a 'policy learning' approach that would instil mutual and bidirectional learning [Portnoi, 2016]. This shift in thinking towards policy learning offers a more hopeful perspective on the future of education reform in BRICS countries. By its very nature, policy trans-

fer or borrowing is problematic and needs to be challenged, as it is inherently Western-centric and relies on established global rankings and benchmarking regimes as references for comparison and prescription. This paper offers an alternative to policy borrowing, identifies the key challenges South Africa faced in implementing OBE, explains the reasons for these challenges, and suggests how South Africa may inform the other BRICS countries in their efforts for educational reform.

**Significance of the paper**

The implementation of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) in South Africa — a very clearly 'borrowed' policy that failed — highlights the dangers of policy transfer and the need for an alternative approach. The paper is highly relevant to contemporary academic discussions on educational policy borrowing, curriculum reform, and the socio-political dynamics of education in developing countries. The article addresses a critically important topic, especially given South Africa's unique position within the BRICS group and its ongoing efforts to reform its educational system in the post-apartheid era. The focus on OBE and its associated challenges is timely and pertinent, contributing to broader conversations about educational policy in developing nations. The paper could provide more context on what this 'alternative approach' might look like, as this would give the reader a clearer understanding of potential solutions. With that said, a limited discussion includes observations of policy transfer, implications from its implementation in the other BRICS countries, and inferences from the South African experience. However, the value of such a discussion remains ambiguous since the BRICS countries are known for their profound diversity, and thus, comparisons cannot be easily made. These countries have very dissimilar education systems, shaped by differing societal contexts (geography, demography, social system, economy, politics, and religion) [Steyn, Wolhuter, 2021], resulting in varying rates of improvement across the BRICS [Carnoy et al., 2014]. What all BRICS countries have in common is the need for an expansion of education.

**What do we mean by policy borrowing symbolism?**

In this paper, 'policy borrowing symbolism' refer to the practice of adopting educational policies from foreign contexts without considering the local socio-cultural settings and without conducting adequate research into their success and effects [Steiner-Khamsi, 2014]. This paper argues that a critically important cause for the failure of OBE in South Africa was the naïve expectation that borrowing OBE from a Western education system would solve all the problems in the South African education system [Wolhuter, 2014]. We are learning that policies that are hastily adopted from foreign contexts without adequate research into their success and effects ultimately fail. The key to successful policy implementation lies in thorough research and evi-

dence-based decision-making. Policy analysts [Taylor et al., 1997] remind us that education systems are an integral part of the social fabric in which they operate. One must consider their historical, political, social, and cultural settings to understand them. Effective educational adoptions require a solid understanding of how ideas, concepts, and educational innovations are borrowed, adapted, and implemented locally.

Cultural imperatives are a paramount aspect to consider when analyzing the possibilities of useful educational borrowing. It is the socio-cultural settings that keep policies in place and provide resistance to the transfer of ideas from other countries and systems. The preparedness of local contexts to accept or receive such ideas is critical [Steiner-Khamsi, 2014]. Implementing an outcomes-based curriculum in South Africa marked a significant step in bringing the country's education system up to par with those of Western countries. However, the adoption process posed significant challenges. The curriculum needed to be borrowed and adjusted with sufficient regard for the local context, often resulting in inadequate teacher training and poor design and introduction into schools. As a result, the curriculum implementation process was plagued with controversy and contestation within the education system [Cross, Mungadi, Rouhani, 2002], leaving a legacy of policy tensions in efforts to achieve an integrated and inclusive curriculum that embraces diversity [Jansen, 1998].

The policy literature in developing countries is replete with failure narratives attributed to the lack of resources, inadequate teacher training, weak design implementation, and coherence problems [Jansen, 2002]. Meanwhile, the education policymaking case demonstrates a preoccupation with the political rather than practical aspects of the matter. The main argument is that policy borrowing symbolism ignores implementation strategies. Jansen [2002] interprets the findings on the non-implementation of policies/reforms across large school districts in South Africa as symbolically attractive, not because there were no resources to implement them or that they were expressed differently, but due to the symbolic role of policy impact on the practical consequences of such policy. Political symbolism refers to the celebration of policy principles rather than the implementation and ownership of process and product [Laugksch, Aldridge, Fraser, 2007].

## Outcomes-based education

Various authors have traced the origins and nature of outcomes-based education (OBE) [Sepadi, Molapo, 2024]. Fiske and Ladd [2004] describe the method as an instructional one, in which curriculum planners teach the general knowledge, skills, and values that learners should acquire. OBE is grounded in two pillars of knowledge: (1) competency-based education and (2) mastery learning. Formative and summative assessments are rooted in OBE to ensure students meet the outcomes. The other forms of pedagogy used in OBE include au-

thentic assessment, interdisciplinary teaching, and group learning [Darling-Hammond, 2020]. OBE focuses explicitly on defining specific learning outcomes or objectives for students, encompassing the knowledge, skills, and competencies they are expected to acquire by the end of a course or program. It empowers students to take control of their education, set goals, and monitor their progress. Assessments are closely aligned with the learning outcomes, minimizing the focus on rote memorization and encouraging the development of higher-order thinking skills and the practical application of knowledge [Ibid.].

Institutions adopting OBE typically establish systems for continuous improvement by collecting and analyzing data on student performance to assess the effectiveness of teaching methods and curriculum design. OBE also encourages curriculum flexibility and adaptation to meet evolving educational needs, industry trends, and societal demands. While OBE offers numerous advantages, its implementation can present challenges at the best of times, including the need for practical assessment tools, faculty training, and the ongoing evaluation and refinement of learning outcomes to ensure they remain relevant. OBE emphasizes collaboration and enhances students' preparedness for academic and professional journeys by focusing on learning objectives and fostering student-centric learning experiences. This transformative shift/evolutionary transition underscores the unwavering dedication of the education sector to remain agile and responsive to the dynamic demands of students and society in our ever-evolving global landscape.

While these positive results may be valid in other countries, South Africa faces more challenges, resulting in fewer possibilities and benefits of OBE. Many teachers' experiences with the implementation of OBE in South Africa [Laugksch, Aldridge, Fraser, 2007] have raised debate and even doubts about OBE, despite its intent to provide teacher autonomy, increase student self-esteem, improve attendance, and promote higher learner outcomes. In South Africa, where the post-apartheid political ideology is democracy, the hope was that reformed curriculum initiatives (such as outcome-based education) could help reduce inequalities based on race, class, and gender. However, research suggests this has not been the case, and the reform actually contributes to inequalities. It is essential to note that, when implemented effectively, OBE can help reduce these inequalities and foster a more equitable society. This paper intends to understand the challenges encountered when implementing a Western-based curriculum reform (e.g., OBE) in a developing country.

## Policy problem

Curriculum reform in South Africa has left a legacy of policy tensions, highlighting the urgent need for a clear vision of the country's realities [Seopetsa, 2020]. These realities include a fraught cultural his-

tory, impoverished students, symbolic policies, poor school conditions, inadequate curriculum implementation, and a lack of teacher knowledge. The legacy of apartheid has had a damaging effect on the socio-political fabric of the country. Even after 30 years of democratic efforts, the unexpected consequences of apartheid still impede social and educational democracy; sexism, racism, and classism continue to prevail. Therefore, given the current socio-economic conditions in South Africa, a focus on the potential of schools in society is crucial.

The National Qualifications Framework encouraged local community collaboration in schools through school governing bodies, which comprised teachers, learners, parents, and other relevant stakeholders at each school. The emergence of OBE in South Africa can be traced back to the labour movement's efforts to overhaul the education system and incorporate an integrated approach to teaching. Activists outside the traditional education establishment, with solid international ties, played a crucial role in shaping a new educational agenda in South Africa. The developers of the OBE movement identify three types of OBE: 'traditional, transitional, and *transformational*.' The then Minister of Education, Mr. S.M. Bengu, introduced '*transformational*' outcomes-based education as a new strategy in Cape Town in April 1997 [Williamson, 2000]. The choice of '*transformational*' is noteworthy since it requires creating a whole new system in curriculum development, strategic planning, resource allocation and outcome prediction, resulting in the entire education system being changed to meet the needs of the country and society.

Outcomes-based education was not merely borrowed from Western countries, but also adopted and accepted uncritically by South Africans, as it was common practice to introduce reforms rhetorically and symbolically. This curriculum initiative ultimately became part of state policy, serving as a symbol of political expediency to give the impression that change was taking place for disadvantaged groups [Jansen, 2002]. Restricted to a small pool of countries in the Western world, OBE was regarded as "the state-of-the-art" thinking in Western schooling and the best international experience to address South African problems. OBE was borrowed from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and parts of the United States, countries which underpin such social values as peace, prosperity, non-sexism, non-racialism, and democracy. However, this view was criticized by those who saw OBE as an imposition of the Western world or, in other words, another manifestation of cultural imperialism [Christie, 1999; 2008].

The criticism of the curriculum reform in South Africa reflects the general pessimism and disappointment that policies existed mainly in written form, without being implemented [Chisholm, Fuller, 1996; Jansen, 1998; 2002]. The curriculum policy remained in a perpetual state of positioning and symbolism, never intended for actual implementation [Jansen, 1998]. Like in many other developing countries,

the curriculum reform in South Africa left a legacy of structural and policy tensions. These tensions, which have hindered the successful implementation of any new curriculum, include a lack of vision of the country's realities, symbolic policies that pacify mass expectations amidst poor school conditions, limited teacher knowledge to decipher outcomes-based learning [Rensburg, 2000], and a poor understanding of policy borrowing [Jansen, 2002].

While curriculum models such as OBE have proven effective in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and parts of the United States, the immediate problems with implementing the new curriculum in South Africa were evident. The introduction of OBE required a paradigm shift that many educators needed help to adapt to. It became clear that OBE was grounded in assessment principles — a body of knowledge unfamiliar to South African educators. By its nature, the model rested on foundational knowledge and practice of formative assessment as a continuous feedback loop rather than a summative assessment process that only provides final test evaluations [Leibowitz, 2017]. Nakabugo and Siebörger [2001] stress that establishing outcomes and assessment standards, and merely telling teachers they must change their approach to teaching, was unproductive. Without appropriate training, teachers were left to rely on their understanding and perceptions of curriculum documents, which appeared unsuccessful.

A problematic dimension of OBE that has been the subject of considerable debate in South Africa, as well as globally, is the adoption of curricula from Western countries. Steiner-Khamsi [2002] explains that "the educational import of policies is often a strategy to signal symbolically a rupture with the past" (p. 80). Educational policy borrowing is becoming an increasingly fruitful area of international comparative educational research [Steiner-Khamsi, 2002]. The most prominent comparative studies on educational transfer are those of Jürgen Schriewer. Based on Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Self-referential Systems [Luhmann, 1990], Schriewer analyzes the emergence of 'Das Internationale Argument' in policy discourse and educational research. 'Das Internationale Argument' refers to using experiences in other educational systems as sources of 'uncontested' authority. Notably, to counter this uncontested approach, a growing number of researchers analyze the complex politics of educational transfer and examine the political reasons for the failure of importing or exporting educational reform models [Schriewer, 2000; Steiner-Khamsi, 2002; 2014].

Jonathan [2000] emphasizes the value of borrowing a system by understanding the importance of adapting the policy to the local environment and hopefully learning from past mistakes. This underscores the need to perceive the system as being transformed from one society to another, not just as what seems to work, given adequately favourable conditions, but as what has yet to work. Lehoko [2000], from the DOE, compared outcomes-based pedagogy in Soweto and

New Zealand. In doing so, he raised concerns about the dangers of borrowing from a vasr system and applying it to a small and complex one, such as Soweto. The biggest problem in this regard is the silence about negative experiences from other countries on the continent and elsewhere [Cross, Mungadi, Rouhani, 2002].

It is essential to critically examine outcomes-based education in South Africa and adapt the curriculum to the local context, rather than merely adopting a system from Western countries. This emphasis on local adaptation validates and respects the unique context of South Africa. While an outcomes-based curriculum might bring South Africa to the world stage by offering a curriculum equal to that of Western countries, serious internal problems must be addressed. The most problematic issue regarding OBE is the borrowing and appropriation of this curriculum model. In this process, no regard was paid to the context within which the curriculum was being implemented. This affected the design and introduction (or non-introduction) of the system into schools. Teachers were not ready to implement OBE because they did not understand it, nor had they received adequate training.

An effective adoption of curriculum policies is only ensured by a thorough understanding of how ideas, concepts, and educational innovations are borrowed, adapted, and implemented locally. The most critical aspect to consider when weighing the possibilities of useful educational borrowing is cultural imperatives. It is the socio-cultural setting that maintains policies in place and resists the transfer of ideas from other countries and systems [Steiner-Khamsi, 2014]. This necessitates policies that are not merely borrowed but adapted to the local context, taking into account the country's unique socio-cultural settings.

In South Africa and Western countries, OBE remains an experimental approach at various levels, still employed in the curriculum as a whole or in part. For example, in Australia, OBE became part of a national mission with local adaptations. In Canada, OBE was a provincial experiment that gained popularity in Ontario. In Scotland, OBE was restricted to vocational programs within Glasgow. In the United States, OBE was met with much hostility at the state level but gained acceptance in the districts [Young, 2000].

OBE has to be problematized in terms of the range of expectations around it [Jonathan, 2000; Young, 2000]. Jansen [1998] posits that the curriculum is part of state policy symbolism and political expediency, giving the impression that change is taking place for disadvantaged groups. However, Jansen [1998] cautions that it is unproductive to simplify policy problems and view global influences merely as impositions on local contexts, as this overlooks the agency of local actors and the diverse forms that adaptation to local circumstances takes. Thus, although OBE reflects a pastiche of policy borrowing, issues with it appear to be woven into the texture of local life, which must be consi-

dered. Another criticism of OBE concerns the political process that should have informed curriculum development. After labour's active involvement in initial curriculum debates, it is alleged that technocrats, including foreign consultants, dominated the discussion at the expense of local practitioners. The consequences were twofold. The role of teachers in curriculum design became marginal. OBE has also been criticized for using ambiguous language, which can be perceived as elitist by teachers who are supposed to implement it, thereby reducing the policy's effectiveness and undermining its profound political implications for the Government's redress project [Christie, 2008; Jansen, 1998]. Critics stress the need for greater alignment between curriculum development, teacher development, and the selection and supply of learning materials [Potenza, Ball, 1994]. Thus, the lack of curriculum coordination led to poor implementation, ad hoc workshops (in place of teacher training), a lack of relevant OBE materials, delays, and non-delivery of such materials. As Christie [1999] points out, the curriculum should have been better planned, and teachers should have been provided with adequate training and resources. Another criticism concerns the degree of state intervention in the curriculum process, or the lack thereof. In short, for critics, OBE is an example of a bureaucratic-driven curriculum reform process [Rensburg, 2000].

**Discussion of the policy problem**

Patterns of privilege and disadvantage permeate the South African education system [OECD, 2008]. Sadly, the reality is that the right to education implies the right to participate in the existing and enduring system of stratification [Christie, 2008]. The community, schools, parents, local education officials, and the media must collaborate to mitigate restrictions on access to education. This type of synergistic participation by all stakeholders enables communities to identify problems, develop comprehensive and long-term solutions, and take effective action. There is a continued need for "conscientization" among the general public, the judiciary, and bureaucrats regarding the impact of poverty and persistent inequality despite democratic reforms [Kellner, 2000]. The problem is that policymakers, the Government, and other stakeholders address policy challenges theoretically in the political sector, rather than practically in the classroom (e.g., OBE) [Jansen, 2002]. What is needed is regard for implementation and training: "… the effectiveness of local schools will not magically increase if the policy agenda remains centred on symbols of opportunity" [Chisholm, Fuller, 1996. P. 714]. After policies are developed, it is expected that the stages of implementation will be outlined for administrators. Implementation, however, is rarely found in South African education policy agendas [Spreen, 2001]. Jansen [2002] criticized the Government for providing minimal training for Grade One teachers on the implementation of OBE, which led to the hiring of untrained teachers. Tea-

chers must still figure out how to implement the new curriculum with limited resources and large classes [Jansen, 2002].

In Williamson's [2000] comparative analysis of OBE in Australia and South Africa, we hear the opinions of teachers interviewed in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa, who voiced considerable differences in their understanding of OBE, resulting in a lack of coherence in what constituted OBE practice and progression from grade to grade. All teachers interviewed appeared insecure and unsure of their OBE teaching practices, regardless of their years of teaching experience and the available resources. In preparation for the reform, teachers felt that the workshops were too short, with inadequate time for assimilating the amount of information required. Most teachers claimed not to have achieved any success with the implementation of OBE due to limited exposure to OBE via the workshops, a lack of support systems to help them in the implementation process, insufficient resources, and poor infrastructure.

> I have not experienced any success with OBE due to the obstacles and difficulties encountered in implementing OBE thus far. There has been a lack of resources, parent involvement, and desks, chairs, and workspaces for the learners. Furthermore, the workshops were impractical, and the Department of Education requires more practical workshops on OBE, as well as visits to schools by subject advisors (*Teacher*).

In particular, the language of OBE is often labelled 'elitist language', requiring translation for teachers. There is a crucial need to clarify the policy language, mobilize resources to under-funded and under-resourced schools, develop strategies and not just symbols for policy implementation, and move from rhetoric to action. These factors are vital for a successful implementation of OBE.

> I cannot grasp the terminology, eight learning areas, and the expectation to continuously assess and report on 57 learners. There is just far too much to comprehend in OBE. I advise the Department to reconsider the terminology, reduce class sizes, and return to traditional teaching methods (*Teacher*).

While South Africa is committed to equality with the Western world on paper, i.e., symbolically, oppression still prevails [Spreen, Vally, 2006]. Education policy based on research should focus on changing classroom practices, helping to validate curricula and teaching models through extensive staff development, acknowledging the importance of local context, establishing solid relationships with families and communities, and building school capacity to improve. This task becomes more urgent as education now falls under the routine

scrutiny and accountability of the media, which pervades the lives of the citizenry to an unprecedented degree. Consequently, the political stakes have increased in South Africa. Some scholars (e.g. [Spreen, Vally, 2006] believe educational goals in South Africa are so unrealistic that they will never be reached. Apple [1996] points out that,

> Outcome-based education... is a simplistic solution to very complicated problems. The real issues involve the immense poverty in our inner cities and rural areas, the under-financing of our schools, the lack of genuine respect for and cooperation with local minority communities, and the overly bureaucratic nature of our decision-making (p. 78).

This paper argues for a focused shift in thinking, moving away from policy borrowing to *policy learning*, in which policymakers purposefully gather information to make informed choices based on past policy experience or predictions about new policies. In some cases, this learning may involve exploring alternatives present in international experiences, which can occur through visits to another country or studying relevant documents. Because policy learning focuses on making data-driven decisions, it may result in a policy not being adopted because policymakers deem it unfeasible or undesirable in the local context [Raffe, 2011].

**How does South Africa differ from the other BRICS countries?**

Each BRICS country has constitutionally recognized access to education as a fundamental right [UNESCO, 2014]. However, this goal has yet to be adequately achieved due to significant differences in priorities, levels of investment, and quality of education. While it is challenging to compare the development of education among the BRICS countries, some common factors, including policy failure, inadequate infrastructure, a lack of teaching expertise, inefficient resource management, and poor funding structures, have acted as impediments to progress [Ardichvili, Zavyalova, Minina, 2012]. Across the BRICS, there are indications of rising investment in education at varying rates of improvement [Carnoy et al., 2014]. Comparing education systems in the BRICS is not a trivial task, as it entails considering the diverse educational challenges faced by these countries.

During apartheid, South African education was in an ailing condition; however, over the post-apartheid period, the country has made significant strides. In 1980, the average number of years of study for youth aged 15 years or older was 5 years; this average increased to 9 years by 2010 [Barrow, Lee, 2013]. Another significant advance in the country was pre-primary education, with the gross enrollment rate increasing by 49% over the last twenty years, reaching 77% in 2014 [UNESCO, 2017]. At the primary level, the gross enrolment rate rose from 79.6% in 1994 to 98.8% in 2014, indicating a promising trajectory

for the future [Barrow, Lee, 2013]. Regarding tertiary education, the country presents the worst gross enrolment rate among the BRICS, rising from 4% in 1970 to 15% in 1994 and 19.4% in 2014. South Africa has more challenges in achieving quality education than the other BRICS countries. According to the Global Competitiveness Report, the country ranks 134th out of 138 in the quality ranking of its education system — the worst position among the BRICS [Ibid.]. In international tests, South African students perform even worse than those in BRICS countries, which have fewer resources. For example, in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study [TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, 2015], the score of South Africa's Grade 9 students increased between 2011 and 2015, yet the country remains low in math and last in sciences. Like the other BRICS countries, the country faces serious issues related to the teaching profession, particularly in terms of quality and quantity. First, there is a high student-teacher ratio. By 2014, there were an average of 31 pupils per teacher in public schools, while in private schools, this number was 15[1]. Second, available teachers often lack adequate qualifications. The 2007 Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACEQ) found that 79% of grade 6 teachers showed content knowledge below their students' expected level [Venkat, Spaull, 2015].

While the South African Government increased education spending to 6% of GDP in 2014 (above the average expenditure of most BRICS countries), the distribution of these resources remains a concern [UNESCO, 2017]. Despite this spending effort, school infrastructure is still far from ideal. Many schools lack basic facilities (e.g., libraries, computer centres, and laboratories). This inequitable distribution of resources hinders the provision of quality education in South African schools, underscoring the urgent need for more equitable resource allocation to address disparities in the country's education system. As of 2016, 70.8%, 58.6%, and 81.7% of its schools had no libraries, computer centres, and laboratories, respectively[2].

A comparison of education systems in BRICS reveals several similar features, including inequality (racial and gender) and generally low educational standards, which are attributed to other institutional problems [Dalcin et al., 2020]. According to a study by Imre-Biyikli and Kamil [2024], which measured the effectiveness of education in the BRICS countries, literacy rates and educational attainment are high in all BRICS countries **except** South Africa. A systematic study measured the effectiveness of education to evaluate the level of realization of the objectives of education, the benefits gained from education, the value of education, the development opportunities, and the

[1] South African Government, Department of Basic Education (2016) Strategic Plan 2015–2020.

[2] South African Government, Department of Basic Education (2016) National Curriculum Framework for Schools: Revised.

performance of those responsible for education. Their results showed that educational effectiveness could not be achieved in South Africa. For the educational system to function appropriately and effectively, it is necessary to determine the training needs correctly, fulfil the training in a planned and systematic way, act according to the principle of equal opportunities in education, and provide training that is compatible with the vision, mission, goals, and strategies of the country's educational vision.

While the South African Constitution refers to basic education as a fundamental right[3], the education system faces significant challenges. The system has high costs and low performance, and the full realization of a child's right to a basic education is not satisfactorily realized [Chürr, 2015]. While the literacy rate for the category of "15-year-olds and over" is 87% [United Nations, 2020b], 78% of South African children in Grade 3 cannot read for meaning [Davids, 2019]. This is attributed to the initial emphasis on learning in a mother tongue (not English) and then only switching to English in Grade 4. This means many students start their literacy journey later than those in other countries. Poor schools and communities lack reading resources, which exacerbates this situation. In contrast, more affluent communities have access to appropriate reading resources, as evident in literacy learning in wealthy, advanced schools [Ibid.]. Children's education is based on the educational quality of teachers, and historically, the quality and supply of teachers have been uneven and inconsistent.

**How can South Africa inform other BRICS Countries?**

Outcomes-based education (OBE) has been implemented in many BRICS countries with varying degrees of success. However, South Africa faces unique challenges, including historical disparities, a lack of accountability, and economic inequalities, which make a comparison of policy reform among BRICS countries difficult. While the other BRICS countries prioritize education and economic development, their approaches to OBE vary based on their unique socio-economic and educational contexts. Research on OBE in BRICS shows variations in focus, with some countries emphasizing content knowledge and others focusing on teacher-student roles or systemic challenges. Each BRICS country has adopted a distinct educational approach, emphasizing a specific priority and agenda [Singh, 2023]. For example, South Africa's OBE reform aimed to shift the focus from a content-driven curriculum to one that facilitates lifelong learning. Since China is known for its strong emphasis on science and technology education, OBE is critical in promoting innovation and sustainable development. Like South Africa, India faces challenges in ensuring equitable access to quality education, and OBE has become a

[3] South African Schools Act, no 84 of 1996. *Government Gazette*, no 377 (17579).

tool to address these disparities. Unlike South Africa, Brazil emphasizes content knowledge in its educational approach, and OBE helps ensure that students are well-prepared for higher education and employment. Russia's education system is known for its strong focus on academic rigour, and, like Brazil, prioritizes students' preparedness for receiving higher education and joining the workforce. The differing intentions for OBE within these various contexts highlight the difficulty of comparing BRICS countries and underscore the varied outcomes of OBE [Singh, 2023].

In terms of educational experience, it seems more sensible to compare South Africa with Brazil and India, as these BRICS countries have a history of colonization, which, in different ways, has left imprints on the current structure and functioning of their national innovation and education systems [De Villiers, De Villiers, 2023]. De Villiers & De Villiers' [2023] review of OBE policy in Brazil and South Africa provides insights into why identical educational goals yield dissimilar results in these two BRICS countries. While South Africa has legislation and funding that aim to improve education, significant educational challenges hinder any progress and puts South Africa at a disadvantage compared to Brazil. For example, the literacy rate in South Africa is lower than that in Brazil; teacher training does not lead to enhanced learning and teaching; and there is no monetary incentive for principals and teachers to ensure that expertise is retained, which could decrease the content knowledge gap. South African teachers earn more than their counterparts in Brazil, yet their level of expertise appears to be less than that of teachers in Brazil. The most salient takeaway from the comparative study is that the historical disparities of the past in South Africa have not been adequately addressed, resulting in uneven outcomes and achievement in schools. There is a lack of accountability due to inadequate monitoring and evaluation. The inequalities in education opportunities in South Africa are both a symptom and cause of economic inequalities in South African society. South Africa lacks key factors that secure the effectiveness of an educational reform, such as a legal framework, effective planning and financing, and a better use of resources, monitoring and evaluation, and inclusive participation and mobilization of civil society. Ultimately, education policies that contribute to equality in Brazil have the opposite effect in South Africa, making educational reform a unique challenge for the latter.

## Concluding thoughts

The emphasis on critical analysis when borrowing a policy underscores the importance of thorough evaluation in policymaking. More specifically, context matters because policies that work well in one place may not be suitable for another due to differences in cultural, economic, and social structures, as well as variations in the political landscape. Adopting another policy is not enough; the focus should

shift from identifying "best practices" to understanding the underlying principles and processes that led to their success. Critical analysis is crucial, so before adopting a policy, it is essential to thoroughly analyze its potential impact and consider both intended and unintended consequences. Adaptability and customization are necessary, rather than wholesale replication; policies should be adapted and customized to fit the specific needs and circumstances of the borrowing context. Evaluating the effectiveness of borrowed policies and monitoring their impact is crucial to ensuring the desired outcomes. When done correctly, borrowing implies understanding the rationale behind policies rather than merely copying them. A "better approach" should give way to a more nuanced approach, one that involves 'policy learning', i.e careful consideration of the context, purpose, and potential consequences rather than mere replication of policies from other regions. This 'why' refers to the underlying values, goals, and strategies that informed the creation of this. Perhaps most importantly, governments should carefully consider their motives and objectives for engaging in the policy borrowing process from the outset. Failing to do so risks confusion around how the policy is defined, how it is enacted, and what it entails. Policy borrowing can be a powerful tool for educational reform. However, it should be approached with caution and a deep understanding of the context in which the policy will be implemented.

**References**

Apple M. (1996) *Cultural Politics and Education*. New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Ardichvili A., Zavyalova E., Minina V. (2012) Human Capital Development: Comparative Analysis of BRICs. *European Journal of Training and Development*, vol. 26, no 2/3, pp. 213–233. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090591211204724

Barrow R.J., Lee J. (2013) A New Data Set of Educational Attainment in the World, 1950–2010*. Journal of Development Economics*, vol. 104, September, pp. 184–198. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2012.10.001

Carnoy M., Froumin I., Loyalka P., Tilak J. (2014) The Concept of Public Goods, the State, and Higher Education Finance: A View from the BRICs. *Higher Education*, vol. 68*,* pp. 359–378. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9717-1

Chisholm L., Fuller B. (1996) Remember People's Education? Shifting Alliances, State-Building and South Africa's Narrowing Policy Agenda. *Journal of Education Policy,* vol. 11, no 6, pp. 693–716. https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093960110604

Christie P. (2008) *Opening the Doors of Learning: Changing Schools in Post-Apartheid South Africa.* Johannesburg: Heinemann.

Christie P. (1999) OBE and Unfolding Policy Trajectories: Lessons to Be Learned. *Changing the Curriculum: Studies on Outcomes-Based Education in South Africa* (eds J. Jansen, P. Christie), Cape Town: Juta, pp. 279–292.

Chürr C. (2015) Realization of a Child's Right to a Basic Education in the South African School System: Some Lessons from Germany. *Potchefstroomse Elektroniese Regsblad,* vol. 18, no 7, pp. 2405–2455. https://doi.org/10.4314/pelj.v18i7.01

Cross M., Mungadi R., Rouhani S. (2002) From Policy to Practice: Curriculum Reform in South African Education. *Comparative Education*, vol. 38, iss. 2, pp. 171–187. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050060220140566

Dalcin A.K., Kang T.H., Zanon D., Bellé F.A., Betti L.P., Rasche F.A. Jr, Comim F. (2020) Education in BRICS. *Handbook of BRICS and Emerging Economies*

(eds P.B. Anand, F. Shailaja, F. Comim), Oxford: Oxford University, pp. 450–480. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198827535.003.0016

Darling-Hammond L. (2020) Culture, Learning and Policy. *Handbook of The Cultural Foundations of Learning* (eds N.S. Nasir, C.D. Lee, R. Pea, M. McKinney de Royston), New York; London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 404–425.

Davids N. (2019) *University of Cape Town: Solving SA's Literacy Crisis.* Available at: https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2019-01-11-solving-sas-literacy-crisis (accessed 21.11.2025).

De Villiers D.J., De Villiers A.C. (2023) A Comparative Review of Education Policy in Brazil and South Africa: Divergent Trends in Inequality. *Athens Journal of Education*, vol. 10, no 2, pp. 323–344. https://doi.org/10.30958/aje.10-2-8

Fiske E.B, Ladd H.F. (2004) *Elusive Equity: Education Reform in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2006.0049

Imre-Biyikli S., Kamil A.A. (2024) Measurement of Education Effectiveness in the BRICS Countries and Turkey. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research.* https://doi.org/10.17583/remie.8990

Jansen J.D. (2002) Political Symbolism as Policy Craft: Explaining Non-Reform in South African Education after Apartheid. *Journal of Education Policy*, vol. 1, no 2, pp. 199–215. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930110116534

Jansen J.D. (1998) Curriculum Reform in South Africa: A Critical Analysis of Outcomes-Based Education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, vol. 28, no 3, pp. 321–331. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764980280305

Jonathan R. (2000) *The Role of Schooling in Social Transformation: High Hopes and Reasonable Expectations.* Paper Presented at Kenton Ebhayi Conference (Port Elizabeth, 2000, 27–29 October).

Kellner D. (2000) *Globalization and New Social Movements: Lessons for Critical Theory and Pedagogy.* London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315022642

Laugksch R.C., Aldridge J.M., Fraser B.J. (2007) *Outcomes-Based Education in South Africa: Using an Instrument to Assess School-Level Environments during the Implementation*. Paper presented at the 2007 Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education (Fremantle, 2007, 25–29 November).

Lehoko K. (2000) *Address to the HSRC.* Roundtable Discussion (Pretoria, South Africa, 2000, 24–25 October).

Leibowitz B. (2017) Power, Knowledge and Learning: Hegemonising Colonial Knowledge. *Alternation Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa*, vol. 24, no 2, pp. 99–119. https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2017/v24n2a6

Luhmann N. (1990) *Essays on Self-Reference*. New York: Columbia University.

Nakabugo M.G., Siebörger R. (2001) Curriculum Reform and Teaching in South Africa: Making a Paradigm Shift? *International Journal of Educational Development*, vol. 21, no 1, pp. 53–60. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0738-0593(00)00013-4

OECD (2008) *Reviews of National Policies for Education: South Africa*. Paris: OECD.

Portnoi L.M. (2016) *Policy Borrowing and Reform in Education: Globalized Processes and Local Contexts*. New York, NY: Macmillan Palgrave. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-53024-0

Potenza E., Ball S.J. (1994) What Is Policy? Texts, Trajectories and Toolboxes. *Education Reform: A Critical and Post-Structural Approach* (ed. S.J. Ball). Buckingham: Oxford University, pp. 10–17. https://doi.org/10.2307/3121942

Raffe D. (2011) *Policy Borrowing or Policy Learning? How (Not) to Improve Education Systems. CES Briefing no 57.* Edinburgh: Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh.

Rensburg I. (2000) Reflections from the Inside: Key Policy Assumptions and How They Have Shaped Policy Making and Implementation in South Africa, 1994–2000. *Education in Retrospect — Policy and Implementation since 1990* (eds A. Kraak, M. Young), Pretoria: HSRC.

Rodrigues J.W. (2018) BRIC's Education Challenge to Economic Development. *Journal of Education & Social Policy*, vol. 5, no 3, pp. 85–89. https://doi.org/10.30845/jesp.v5n3p10

Schriewer J. (2000) World-System and Interrelationship-Networks: The Internationalization of Education and the Role of Comparative Inquiry. *Educational Knowledge: Changing Relationships between the State, Civil Society, and the Educational Community* (ed. T.S. Popkewitz), Albany, NY: State University of New York, pp. 305–343.

Seopetsa T. (2020) Challenges Facing the Implementation of Public Policies in South Africa since the Dawn of Democracy. *Educor Multidisciplinary Journal*, vol. 4, no 1, pp. 141–175.

Sepadi M., Molapo K. (2024) Exploring Teacher Understanding of Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement Document Implementation in South African Schools. *Frontier Education*, vol. 9, Article no 1354959. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1354959

Singh T. (2023) The Sustainability of Current Account in the BRICS Countries Depends on Economic Policies' Support to Structural Adaptation. *Journal of Policy Modeling*, vol. 45, no 3, pp. 570–591. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpolmod.2023.05.001

Spreen C.A. (2001) *Globalization and Education Policy Borrowing: Mapping out Outcomes-Based Education in South Africa* (PhD Thesis). New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Spreen C.A., Vally S. (2006) Education Rights, Education Policies and Inequality in South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development*, vol. 26, iss. 4, pp. 352–362. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2005.09.004

Steiner-Khamsi G. (2014) Cross-National Policy Borrowing: Understanding Reception and Translation. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, vol. 34, iss. 2, pp. 153–167. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2013.875649

Steiner-Khamsi G. (2002) The Economics of Policy Borrowing and Lending: A Study of Late Adopters. *Oxford Review of Education*, vol. 32, no 5, pp. 665–678. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980600976353

Steyn H.J., Wolhuter C.C. (2021) The Nature of the Education System and Probable Societal Trends of the Early 21st Century. *World Education Systems Entering the Twenty-First Century* (eds C.C. Wolhuter, H.J. Steyn), Noordbrug: Keurkopie, pp. 1–22.

Taylor S., Rizvi F., Lingard B., Henry M. (1997) *Education Policy and the Politics of Change*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203349533

TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center (2015) *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).* Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center.

UNESCO (2020) *South Africa: Education and Literacy.* Paris: United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

UNESCO (2017) *BRICS: Building Education for the Future: Priorities for National Development and International Cooperation*. Paris: United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

UNESCO (2014) *BRICS: Building Education for the Future.* Paris: United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Venkat H., Spaull N. (2015) What Do We Know about Primary Teachers' Mathematical Content Knowledge in South Africa? An Analysis of SACMEQ 2007. *International Journal of Educational Development*, vol. 41, March, pp. 121–130. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2015.02.002

Williamson M.C. (2000) *A Comparative Analysis of Outcomes Based Education in Australia and South Africa* (Masters of Education Thesis). Pretoria: University of South Africa.

Wolhuter C.C. (2014) Weaknesses of South African Education in the Mirror Image of International Educational Development. *South African Journal of Education*, vol. 34, no 2, pp. 1–25. https://doi.org/10.15700/201412071120

Young J. (2000) *An International Perspective on Educational Reform*. Pretoria: HSRC.